

Built-in traps of death

Inferno in Ctg slum

THE fire that broke out at the Chittagong Boubazar slum area snuffed out 21 in sleep at the wee hours of night, 10 of them children. Only on February 23, the blaze at KTS Textile Mills killed 64, 10 of them succumbing to their injuries at a hospital. Chittagong has high incidence of fire; while the Tuesday's tragedy was in a densely populated slum that of February 23 was in a mill area.

All fires fuel a lot of afterthought of what could have been done to reduce the magnitude of the damage but no cautions in place. Can there be standard drill in slum areas to prevent, and cope with fire should it break out, to bring down the fatalities. For instance, the latest fire needn't have been so devastating had the information reached the firefighting department in time. But basically unplanned housing activity left hardly any entry point for lorries with hose pipes to get into any effective position. In the present case, hose pipes had to be hauled up across four-five storied buildings to reach some vantage point on the other side. Then it was too late.

There were altogether 10 warehouses full of inflammable rags. One was at the very entry point to the slum with most of the inhabitants having refused to part slices of land to pave a common path. The little said about the narrow choked lanes, the better. Then there was dearth of water, a perennial problem with firefighters.

Rescue operation was faulty because its emphasis was not on saving trapped lives rather it was wholly devoted to extinguishing fire.

Reportedly three committees have been constituted to go into the Boubazar fire incident reflecting a post-haste spurt in dynamism. The fanfare with which we postmortem a fire tragedy would have served us better if we could have a taskforce instead to go into the structural and safety inadequacies of the slums and set the rules for minimum safety standards.

Licence to rickshawpullers

Let there be a ceiling

CC's move to resume the issuance of licence to streamline movement of rickshaws is a welcome step. Restoration of order in this area has been long overdue. Although DCC in the past years did take some measures in regulating movement of pedal rickshaws on the city streets, these measures did not meet their desired objectives. Unfortunately, these steps far from resolving the problem gave rise to additional difficulties.

Whereas there has been some visible improvement in the movement of traffic on the main thoroughfares due to restrictive plying of rickshaws being diverted to various lanes and by lanes, the traffic tangles have only shifted places.

It must be said that the problems related to managing the movement of rickshaws in the city run deeper than meets the eye. We will do well to remember that rickshawpullers are another bunch of poor people relentlessly engaged in making an honest living through the sweat of their brows by serving compatriots belonging to the fixed and lower income groups.

While issuance of licences is necessary, extreme care should be taken to ensure that not a single rickshawpuller or owner is subjected to undue harassment or illegal gratification. It may be a good idea also to provide some kind of ID card to each of the rickshawpullers. This is necessary in order to prevent the influx of people from the rural areas who throng the city to earn some extra money. Most of these people are not only new to the city but also completely ignorant of any kind of traffic rules, the city road networks and the layout of various localities.

The fact of the matter is the DCC or the administration should consider putting a ceiling on the total number of rickshaws allowed to be in the city over a period of time.

We also recommend that the DCC divide the city limits into different zones for area wise plying of rickshaws to bring discipline in this area. Serious thoughts could also be given for imparting training to rickshawpullers in order to acquaint them with the essence and importance of abiding by traffic rules.

What is so special about June or July?



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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Undue pressure from political parties, ostensibly appearing to speak for the people asserting to uphold public interest, will not do. The people and the country have been made to suffer much distress in their names. Not just any election, but an election free from fear or coercion, and which is transparent, is what the people's demands are.

possible" bear more meaning than they apparently convey.

There is no disagreement on the imperative of having the country governed by elected representatives of the people. This is the choice that the CTG must make, and make it clear to the public. This is something that the political parties must also decide, as to which should be the priority, and allow the CTG to proceed accordingly.

The two major parties heading the two alliances want to hold the caretaker government (CTG) to the months of June and July as far as the election is concerned. The AL has, since, softened its stand on a specific timeframe, instead calling upon the CTG to hold the election "as soon as possible."

The change in AL's emphasis is understandable. What is not is the BNP's fixing of July 11 as the deadline, and the apparent backtracking of the AL on its main demands of foolproof voter list and voter ID card. What's so special about June, or July?

The primary task, some insist the only task, of the CTG is holding the election. However, "holding the election" and "as soon as

possible" bear more meaning than they apparently convey. It, therefore, stands to reason that while the CTG term is not open ended, its efforts to present a free and fair election cannot be weighed down by the constraints of a particular timeframe. This is the point at issue -- a credible and acceptable election has to be ensured if the CTG is to fulfill its mandate. It is the demand of the masses.

Thus, the AL's new position on the election seems rather curious, since it was their position on the two issues, that of a credible electoral role and voter ID, that led to the emergency and the cancellation of the election.

Thus, "holding election" assumes great significance for us. It is not the demand of only the political parties, but also of the people, that merely holding election is not enough. It must allow the people to freely exercise their freedom of choice, and there must be people of good repute, convinced to participate in election without money or muscle power, playing a role in the process. And this is what the CTG and the EC, one would hope, are fully seized with at the moment.

And the process will take time. Not long ago we had suggested in these columns that the CTG must decide on the priorities, and that it must resist the temptation to bite more than it can swallow. One is convinced from the actions initiated by the administration of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed that it has no intention of having anything extra on its plate. And it is just as well that the CTG is concentrating on one major issue, providing a level playing field for the next election, the others, the voter ID card and the electoral roll, being the preserve of the EC, the voter ID card and the electoral roll.

The government's "cleansing" operation against corruption is perhaps one way of ensuring a level playing field. This, we hope, would see the end of money and muscle power, preventing the use of ill-gotten money to win elections by those that would repeat their act of accumulating money through unfair and dubious means, and presenting us with a fait-accompli for the next five years.

But it is just not enough to go after the politicians only, since

they are not the only corrupt elements in the country. The CTG must address the reason why we had to suffer the ignominy of being branded the most corrupt country over the last five years.

Corruption is a cycle whose completion is helped by the triadic nexus of some politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen (businessmen because some of them partnered in the crony capitalism that had brought the country to the verge of a catastrophe).

And it is also not enough to go after the monetary corrupt. There are all varieties of corruption, one of which we have been shockingly exposed to, tampering of mark sheets at the highest level of education, the university, involving, among the many, one who is associated with the highest seat of law, the Supreme Court.

The account of the scam, where even those who did not take the exams were shown as passed, and those who failed were shown as qualified, and the VC's role in the fraud shows how rotten the system is.

This is a dangerous example of moral and ethical depravity, one which one hopes is an exception and not representative of the general psyche. Corruption in all its manifestations must be rooted out. It is just not enough to castigate and dump Faizee only. Those who were a part of this process, the persons who, despite the recommendation of the inquiry

committee, chose not to take any action, but rather gave a clean chit to him, have to be made to account for their actions.

The task before the CTG is well defined. The only factor that will dictate the time of election is the preparation time of voter ID card, which is approximately a year. But the people also want politics cleared of all the rubbish. We ought to give the CTG time.

Undue pressure from political parties, ostensibly appearing to speak for the people asserting to uphold public interest, will not do. The people and the country have been made to suffer much distress in their names. Not just any election, but an election free from fear or coercion, and which is transparent, is what the people's demands are. Constraints of time must not be a deadweight on the CTG.

But rooting out corruption and cleansing the nation of the deadwood will take time. A start has been made, which the elected government should follow up. However, giving an indication about the likely timeline of election would remove apprehensions from the minds of the people as well as the political parties.

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Violence against women in Bangladesh

Political parties, civil society, media, women and men, especially youth, should be involved in preventing violence against women. Regional cooperation and networking is also essential to prevent some forms of violence against women in South Asia. In this regard government, non-government organizations, media and activists can play crucial roles to take the initiative for networking and experience sharing.

MAHBUBA NASREEN

THE theme of the International Women's Day for 2007 is "violence against women," which should be noted by all concerned individuals in Bangladesh. The Human Development Report of South Asia 2002 placed Bangladesh in the third position among countries in which violence against women is highest and most regular.

If the survey had been conducted in recent days, one would not be surprised to find Bangladesh in the first position. After the 8th national assembly, the types and number of incidences related to violence against women introduced a dark chapter in the history of Bangladesh.

The occurrence of horrendous, barbarian and uncivilized rape of girls and women was not only unexpected but also unbelievable to many. Within the short period of time the rape of 500 women and girls was celebrated victoriously.

The state was not embarrassed, instead it denied or ignored such incidences. The state's taking a stand for the victims, thus, remains far cry. We should not be proud of signing

international treaties, as domestic laws are more powerful than international laws.

Violence against women is becoming more and more of a common and widespread issue across the country. The legal process to combat gender-based violence is complicated. Violence against women in Bangladesh are of different kinds.

Some of the major ones are: physical violence, sexual harassment, trafficking/kidnapping, acid attack, dowry, wife battering, fatwa, eve teasing, murder, rape, gang rape and many more.

It is evident that a large number of women are the victims of rape, followed by murder. Rape is the most brutal violence against women, the consequence of which often leads to murder.

The murder of Rahela, Fahima, Mahima are the examples. There are procedural gaps in the state's interventions towards preventing violence. The incidents of violence against women went on rising, only due to the weaknesses in the legal framework, lack of gender sensitivity of administration and poor law and order situation overall.

The media, especially print media, have been playing a positive role in reporting news on violence against women in Bangladesh. The incidents of violence against women, even in remote rural areas, are getting priority in the print media.

However, the electronic media is not playing such a positive role. The grim picture reflected in the daily newspapers only shows further raise in the rate of reported cases of violence against women.

However, many such incidents still remain unreported and unrecognized.

Eve teasing is an everyday phenomenon in Bangladesh. Throughout her life a woman will face eve teasing in various forms. The consequence of eve teasing took the lives of Simi, Rumi and Trisha. In the case of Rahela, the rapists not only raped her but also left her injured, and attempted to destroy the evidence of rape by setting her on fire. This indicates how terrifying the violence against women could be!

State intervention towards preventing violence against women is inadequate till date. Despite continuous pressure by

women activists, the GoB is maintaining reservations to Article 2 and Article 16.1 (c) of CEDAW. It is evident that the state has failed to provide safety to women in custody due to discriminatory practice of the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act.

It is also observed that inadequate resources are provided to women's programs and projects. The policy measures on laws to protect women from discriminatory practices regarding maternity leave, address trafficking in women and children, steps to increase women in politics, and to ensure women's access to resources are inadequate.

The law enforcing authorities failed to protect women and girls from sexual harassment, rape and murder. Moreover, women are being continuously assaulted and arrested by police while participating in public protests.

Fatwa instigated violence against women is yet to be banned by law. Poor rural women are the targets of fatwa, which is evident in the press reports that 30 incidents, on an average, of violence were instigated by fatwas in different rural areas each year in between 1997-2003.

There is a lack of political commitment of leaders. Violence against women is not in the agenda of political parties' manifestos. There is gender imbalance and gender insensitivity of the state interventions, especially

in law enforcing agency and judicial bodies. Little effort has been made by legal and social institutions to amend discriminatory laws and sensitize law enforcement authority.

At present, the state has three interventions to prevent violence against women and provide assistance to women and girls who are violated. These are: legal support, medical support and support from law enforcement authority/police department.

However, there is a lack of proper laws (victim-witness protection laws) and proper implementation of laws. Most of the cases of violence against women remain unresolved.

Despite the law on acid attacks on women, they did not stop due to ineffective mechanisms to restrict the importation, creation and sale of the acid.

The NGOs, including dedicated women's activists, are working to prevent violence against women. Regional cooperation and networking is also essential to prevent some forms of violence against women in South Asia.

In this regard government, non-government organizations, media and activists can play crucial roles to take the initiative for networking and experience sharing.

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The tragedy of Chittagong port

It is high time for all the Bangladeshis to extend wholehearted support to the interim government under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, in their efforts for modernization of Bangladesh in all spheres of life. So, let the derailed train, which has been put on the right track, keep moving non-stop until it reaches the destination.

HABIBUR RAHMAN

THE recent attacks on the Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammed Yunus for his suggestion to redevelop the Chittagong port has encouraged me to write about the port and its past and present economic as well as strategic values.

If Egypt is the gift of the Nile, Chittagong, in particular, and Bangladesh, in general, are the gift of the dancing Karnaphuli river, which itself originated from the Lusai Pahar. The port is on the north-western end of the Karnaphuli river, where it joins the Bay of Bengal.

Without going into a detailed history of the Chittagong port, it is sufficient to say that the British East India Company had first

upgraded this historic port to serve their commercial interests following their occupation of Bengal.

The spread of the Second World War in the Far East had enhanced the strategic and commercial importance of the port for British South East Asia and the Far Eastern war strategy. In 1943, the port became a vital link in communications with the Far East, and a vital supply point for the British troops in the Burma front.

The British left India in August 1947, without taking any parts of the port or its sovereignty, leaving behind a first class administration of the port under the Port Trust Authority of Chittagong.

Ironically, less than sixty years following the departure of

Imperial Britain from India, the then excellent Chittagong port became the victim of piracy and power politics. No sooner had Dr. Yunus come forward with a visionary suggestion for turning the port into a first class regional or continental port for greater economic interest of Bangladesh, he became the target of stinging criticism.

Illogically, the antagonists of the port maintain that "protection and expansion of capitalism is the ultimate goal" of Dr. Yunus' campaign for the redevelopment of the port with foreign investment and technology would "endanger national security" of Bangladesh because of its location within the boundary of the naval zone. If so, Britain would not have upgraded the port as well as establish the naval headquarters, including an airport, not very far from the port premises, to defend India and fight against Japan during the Second World

War.

The location of military installations or naval bases within commercial complexes has always been based on military consideration. So, the development or modernization of a port with foreign management and financial assistance does not endanger the sovereignty of a nation.

There are instances of operation of commercial ports by foreign entrepreneurs in some countries without jeopardizing their national security. Last year Dubai, a member of the United Arab Emirates, wanted to buy leasehold for a port in the United States of America.

It is important to note in this context that in 1995 British Thamess Water, the counterpart of the Bangladesh WASA, got water management contracts in Thailand, China and Australia. In 1996, it won the contract to manage the water supply infrastructure in Turkey, and in Indonesia in 1997.

In December 2006, some

countries, including Qatar, put in bids for buying Thamess Water. Australia won the bid. Does it imply that sovereignty over the rivers of England belongs to Australia?

More importantly, two EPZs, owned by foreign investors either fully or partially, are housed close to the Chittagong port area. Are these EPZs threatening the national security of Bangladesh? If not, there is no justification for misleading the readers, and giving a wrong signal to the prospective foreign port developers, by mixing up the matter of economic development with that of the security issue of the country.

It is high time for Bangladesh to move forward and redevelop the port, including granting of transit rights to the interested neighbouring countries on commercial and strategic grounds. The upgraded port, with first-class services and management, can be used as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the interested transit right seekers, and to

gain concessions from them in other fields.

Moreover, the Chittagong port can also play a role in building the image of Bangladesh once it emerges as a first class South East Asian port with excellent services. In addition to the port, Bangladesh should also take effective steps, under the umbrella of emergency, to privatize Bangladesh Biman, Bangladesh Railways, and the electricity and water resources, for the over-all benefit of the country.

Following the Nobel Laureate's farsighted advice, the present interim government's decision to establish a deep-sea harbour is praiseworthy, and a step forward in promoting Bangladesh as a regional economic hub. It will also be another brand negotiation of Bangladesh in addition to the upgraded Chittagong port.

However, it is important to conclude the feasibility study soon, and set up the deep-sea

harbour before Myanmar sets up its own deep-sea harbour not very far from Bangladesh waters. A suitable location for the proposed deep-sea harbour is on the belt from Sonadia to St. Martin island, as Dr. Yunus suggested. A natural harbour called Badar Makam, in fact, existed on the channel between Shahparir Dip and St. Martin Island